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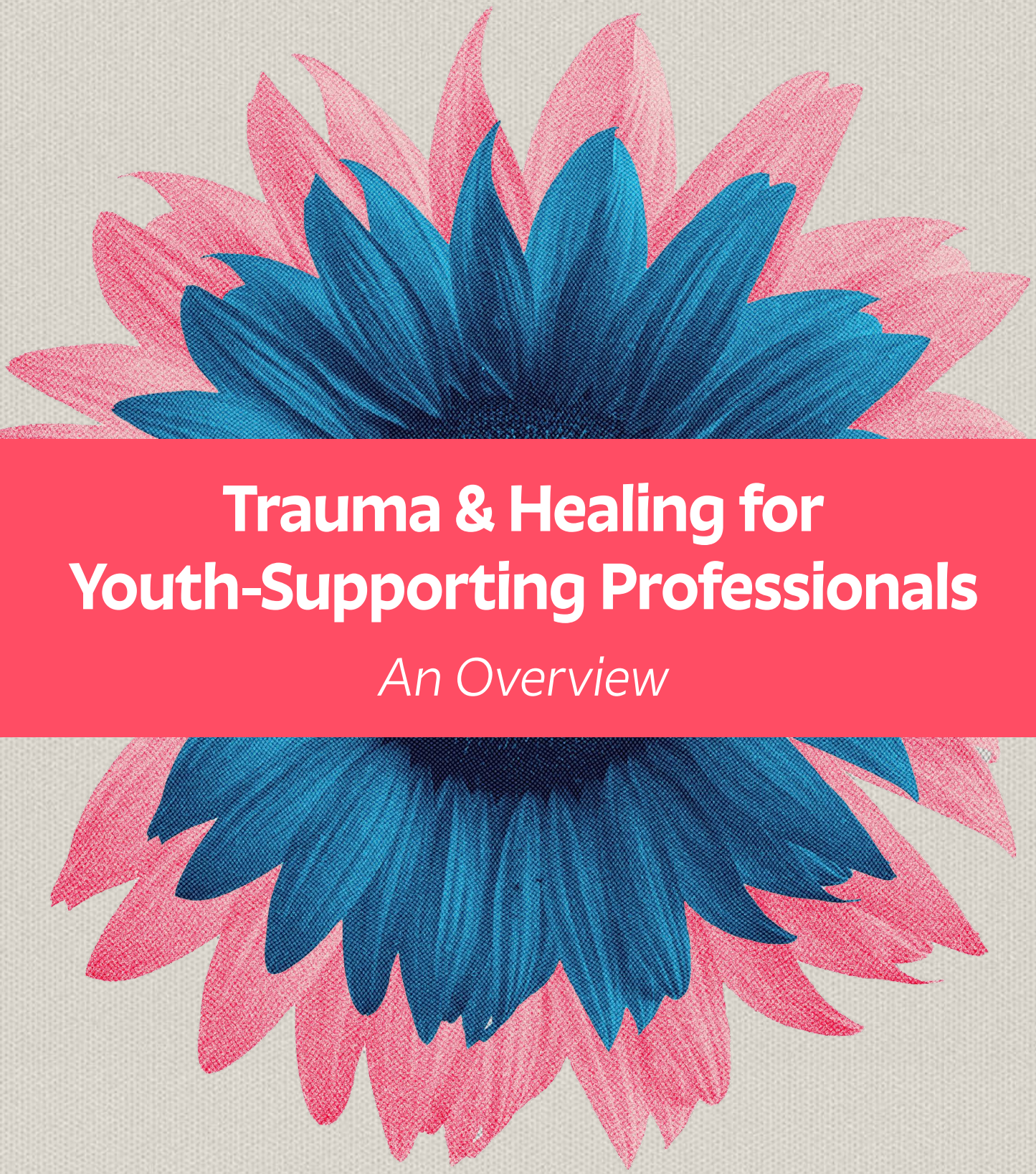

Trauma & Healing for Youth-Supporting Professionals

An Overview

Healthy Teen Network

Johns Hopkins
Center for Adolescent Health

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Many youth-supporting professionals are in the helping profession to "do good." Often their "why" is rooted in compassion, service, empathy, or justice. They may have a desire to help others, a sense of purpose or calling, a curiosity about people and human behavior, and ultimately hope for a more healed and transformed world.

Youth-supporting professionals are often immersed in environments where they encounter the raw realities of trauma on a daily basis, whether it be through listening to the challenging stories of the young people they work with or witnessing distressing situations firsthand. The act of listening to traumatic stories may take an emotional toll that compromises professional and personal functioning.

The truth is, youth-supporting professionals are also at higher risk of emotional, mental, and physical challenges due to the intensity and demanding nature of the work. In addition to navigating the complex issues their clients or patients face, youth-supporting professionals, like all people, also carry their own trauma and personal struggles to the workplace.

These stressors can impact if and how long they stay in the profession, and the interactions with their staff and those they serve. If not addressed, the secondary trauma may be passed onto those they serve, retraumatizing them. Supporting professionals is therefore essential to sustain their well-being, amplify their impact, and ensure they can show up with clarity, compassion, and consistency for the communities they serve.

Trauma and Toxic Stress in the Workplace

Toxic stress is defined as prolonged stress without adequate support that negatively impacts brain development and long-term health (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.). Trauma and toxic stress can show up in the workplace in several ways:

Concept	Definition	Develops From	Main Symptoms
Burnout	A state of chronic physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion from work stress. This chronic stress weakens resilience and increases risk to experience additional forms of toxic stress.	Prolonged workplace demands, lack of support, role overload.	Fatigue, cynicism, reduced job performance, detachment, irritability.
Compassion Fatigue *(sometimes called "the cost of caring")*	Emotional exhaustion and reduced capacity for empathy due to caring for others. It often overlaps with burnout; may lead to STS if intense or traumatic stories are involved.	Repeated exposure to others' suffering and emotional needs.	Numbness, emotional overwhelm, loss of empathy, withdrawal, feeling ineffective.
Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)	A sudden onset of acute trauma-like symptoms that occur after hearing about or witnessing others' trauma. It tends to be more short-term and may emerge after intense compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma.	Direct exposure to others' trauma stories or crises.	Flashbacks, hypervigilance, nightmares, avoidance, anxiety.
Vicarious Trauma	Lasting internal changes in worldview, beliefs, and identity that result from cumulative exposure to others' trauma. It is often deeply rooted and connected to both STS and compassion fatigue.	Long-term exposure to clients' trauma and suffering.	Changes in trust, safety, worldview; intrusive thoughts; emotional numbing; spiritual distress.

For some youth-supporting professionals, it can be difficult to identify when they might be experiencing one or more of these, and it can be even more difficult to understand where and how to get support. However, becoming aware is the first step—it opens the door to finding support, building resilience, and moving toward healing.

Wellness for Youth-Supporting Professionals

Wellness for youth-supporting professionals happens in the following spheres:

PERSONAL LEVEL

Wellness starts with us. It means making intentional choices to care for our own mental, emotional, and physical health. It can look like setting boundaries, finding joy in small moments, resting when needed, or reconnecting with what grounds us.

INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

Our relationships play a vital role in our wellness. When we value and prioritize our own wellness, we create space for our families, friends, colleagues, and organizations to do the same. Supportive connections can uplift and remind us that we are not alone, while others can drain us.

ORGANIZATIONAL/WORKPLACE LEVEL

Organizational wellness is both a strategic priority and a shared responsibility—crucial for creating environments where staff feel valued, supported, and energized to drive meaningful, mission-aligned work.

Now, let's look at each of these spheres in depth.

Personal Wellness

While personal wellness is often portrayed as expensive or indulgent, it is fundamental and essential. It includes acts of preservation, responsibility, and sustainability. This is especially true for youth-supporting professionals who are in roles that involve constant emotional labor, high levels of empathy, and prioritizing of others' needs.

The following eight dimensions of wellness work interdependently and remind us of the complexity of adult life. Making positive and intentional changes in one dimension can have a ripple effect on the others.

Adapted from 8 Dimensions of Wellness created by Dr. Peggy Swarbrick (2006, 2023)

Interpersonal Wellness

Often, early warning signs of increased stress can be found in the ways that we interact with others. This might show up as losing interest in spending time with others, lashing out at loved ones, more easily losing patience with others, withdrawing, and attempting to manage your feelings without others (Volk et al., 2008). As with most commitments in our lives, making self-care part of our daily routine is the best way to sustain it. This means maintaining relationships that strengthen and support us when we need it. Here are several strategies to stay connected (Volk et al., 2008).

RITUALS

- Cook a meal with family or friends.
- Eat a meal with loved ones.
- Attend events that are important to your friends or family (e.g., concerts, team games, etc.).
- Take time to say good morning, good night, or goodbye.
- Participate in spiritual or religious festivities in the community.
- Celebrate life through routines and shared experiences with friends or family (special things you do every day).
- Celebrate birthdays or accomplishments and other ceremonies.

REFLECTION AND BALANCE

- Prioritize relationships over work.
- Evaluate the quality of your current relationships.
- Let go of those connections that are unhealthy and serve as a barrier to well-being.
- Laugh with others, whether at work or home.
- Be nurturing to others.
- Accept nurturing from others.
- Listen.
- Be open to new ideas from family or friends.
- Feel proud of yourself and your family or friends.

ACTIVITIES

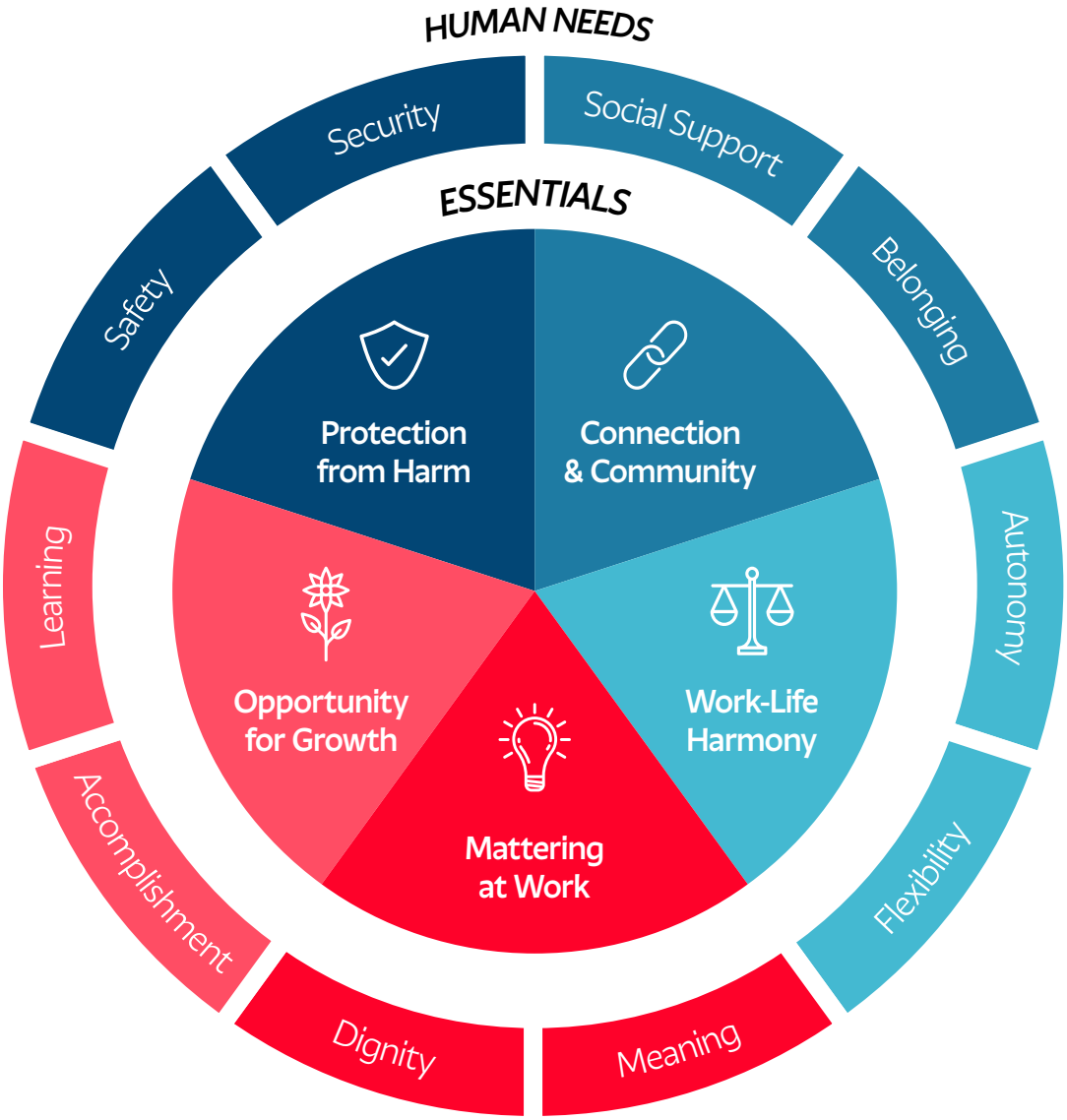
- Spend time relaxing with family or friends (e.g., play games, watch movies, engage in other fun activities).
- Capture memories with photos.
- Read fun stories or books with your family.
- Keep a family journal.
- Participate in volunteer activities with friends or family.
- Take a vacation with loved ones (including day trips, mini vacations, and long weekends).

COMMUNICATION

- Make time to check in with loved ones to let them know how much you love and care for them (e.g., phone calls, notes, emails, etc.).
- Give consensual hugs, kisses, and/or other signs of affection.
- Discuss why relationships with family or friends matter.
- Seek family or relationship therapy when needed.
- Ask for help from a loved one when needed.
- Communicate openly and effectively to those who are important to you.
- Express concerns constructively.
- Have a "phone date" with a friend or family member you haven't spoken with in a while.

Organizational/Workplace Wellness

How we take care of ourselves at work is an important aspect of our overall self-care. Within an organization, self-care is the responsibility of the individual, team members, supervisors, and the leadership. Employees can manage their stress levels by engaging in personal self-care activities, and organizations can play a key role by supporting employees in their efforts to balance their lives and keep the stress level manageable.



Adapted from the Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2025)

Centered on the worker voice and fairness, these five essentials help workplaces promote well-being (Office of the Surgeon General, 2025).

PROTECTION FROM HARM

- Prioritize workplace physical and psychological safety.
- Enable adequate rest.
- Normalize and support mental health.

CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

- Create cultures of belonging.
- Cultivate trusted relationships.
- Foster collaboration and teamwork.

OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

- Offer quality training, education, and mentoring.
- Foster clear, fair pathways for career development.
- Ensure relevant, reciprocal feedback.

MATTERING AT WORK

- Provide a living wage.
- Engage workers in workplace decisions.
- Build a culture of gratitude and recognition.
- Connect individual work with organizational mission.

WORK-LIFE HARMONY

- Provide more autonomy over how work is done.
- Make schedules as flexible as possible.
- Increase access to paid leave.
- Respect boundaries between work and non-work time.

In summary, healing and sustainability for youth-supporting professionals require an intentional balance of personal, communal, and organizational wellness. These professionals often lead with empathy and purpose, making them both powerful agents of change and vulnerable to the weight of secondary trauma and burnout. By fostering environments where individual self-care is valued, peer support is cultivated, and organizational policies actively promote well-being, we create the conditions for professionals to not just survive—but to thrive. When the people who care for youth are themselves cared for, the entire ecosystem of support becomes more resilient, responsive, and healing-centered.

> ***"For us as youth workers, to show up better for young people, we have to do the same—make space for both our trauma and positive things in our lives, but also take very good care of ourselves. We must recognize that we need healing, too."***
> *(Arinze, 2021, para. 5)*

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About Thrivology

Every young person has a right to sexual health and well-being. To realize these rights, young people need access to sexual and reproductive health programs and services that are safe, honest, healing-centered, and trauma-informed.

Youth-supporting professionals—teachers and educators, counselors and clinicians, caring adults—work hard every day to make this happen. With easy access to the latest research, along with practical, helpful opportunities and resources, youth-supporting professionals are better supported and able to provide young people with the very best care and education they deserve.

That's why Healthy Teen Network and Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health have partnered to create Thrivology.

Thrivology creates resources based on the latest research on how to provide the very best sexual and reproductive health education and care, so young people may thrive.

Thrivology is a research-to-practice center funded by the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of Population Affairs. In collaboration with our Research Alliance of experts in the field and Thrivology Youth Leaders, we work to expand the delivery of trauma-informed, healing-centered practices in adolescent sexual and reproductive health programming and care.

Learn more at thrivology.com.